REVIEWS

Issa and the Meaning of Animals: A Buddhist Poet's Perspective, by David G. Lanoue (New Orleans, La.: Haiku Guy, 2014). 292 pages; 5¼″ x 8½″. Glossy black and white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-99-12840-3-0. Price: $12.99 (softcover) or $2.99 (ebook) from online booksellers.

Reviewed by Allan Burns

Quiz question: What has two eyes, a nose, two ears, a mouth, a brain, a heart, blood, lungs, kidneys, a liver, a skeleton, and a nervous system, eats, drinks, excretes, sleeps, dreams, communicates, has memories and a sex drive, experiences emotions, and feels pain?

Did you answer a human? How about a chimpanzee, a dolphin, an elephant, a pig, a goat, a dog, a cat, or a chicken? The correct answer is, of course, all the above and many others.

In our regard for others, we humans tend to exaggerate relatively superficial differences, a mental habit that lies behind both racism and speciesism. In fact, all humans are, on average, ninety-nine point nine percent biochemically similar, regardless of "race," and we share some ninety-six percent of our DNA with chimpanzees. In addition, we share some eighty-eight percent of our genes with mice, eighty-five percent with cows, sixty-five percent with chickens—and eighteen percent with baker's yeast. We sometimes divide the world's species into ourselves and "animals" (lumping all others together), but the fact is that we're closer to chimpanzees than Asian elephants are to African elephants. Imagine if Asian elephants grouped the world's species into Asian elephants and "animals." As Copernicus discovered, our perceptions often aren't the best guide to reality.

But before Darwin lifted the veil that obscured our kinship with other animals, the underlying unity of species was a central theme in the haiku

of Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828)—and that's the subject of the outstanding new book *Issa and the Meaning of Animals: A Buddhist Poet's Perspective* by David G. Lanoue, English professor at Xavier University, novelist, Issa expert, and current president of the Haiku Society of America.

As Lanoue explains, "Issa portrays his fellow creatures with compassion and warmth, describing them at times as his 'cousins'—a moniker that in light of evolutionary theory is perhaps not merely metaphorical." Instead of science, the source of Issa's insight was "derived largely from a Buddhist understanding of all beings as fellow travelers on the karmic road toward enlightenment." Metaphysical assumptions and myths have consequences. Issa's conception of animals was informed by ahimsa, which, as Lanoue explains, is "the doctrine of non-injury to living beings espoused by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism." This stands in contradistinction to the Islamo-Judeo-Christian notions of "separate creation" and "dominion," which have often been invoked to justify appalling behavior toward other species. And other animals have been regarded, in consequence, as not worthy of moral consideration. Giants of Western thought, such as Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, reinforced this misguided and unethical way of looking at other animals. The deep anthropocentric bias of Western thought helps explains why, for instance, a so-called "pro-life" movement seeks to extend ethical protections to human embryos and even zygotes but not to fully developed members of other species, as if "life" were somehow exclusively a human property. This is, of course, a monstrous delusion, but one rarely reflected upon. As Lanoue notes, "Life, for Issa, is life."

Lanoue also argues that "Issa was a serious artist in words who ... [sought] to mend the rift between the human and animal worlds: to depict people and [other] animals sharing common space and a common destiny." For that reason, he adds, "Issa's nature poetry is perhaps even more pertinent today than it was two centuries ago." Indeed, Issa can be regarded as a significant precursor to an animal rights movement that has come to prominence in the West only since about 1980. And how would he have responded to contemporary society's inexorable destruction of the habitats of wild creatures as well as its ghastly treatment of other

species in the food, clothing, experimentation, and "entertainment" (think bullfighting, circuses, zoos, etc.) industries? Lanoue believes it would not be difficult to imagine what Issa would make of, for instance, "mutilated, mass-produced and warehoused chickens of today, beaks and toes cut off, crammed into cages"—or, we might add, the disastrous environmental impact of such factory farms. "Long before the ecological movement," Lanoue writes, "Issa was a green poet." Are haiku poets of this age living up to Issa's legacy and bearing clear-eyed witness to the world around us?

As Lanoue notes, Issa does not refer to "even" frogs with an objectified "it," as if other species were merely things instead of living beings; rather, he calls them a "he" or a "she." Issa rejected the implications of an "I-it" relationship with other animals, which posits them merely as "resources" to be abused, slaughtered, and used as we wish and instead sees them as "fellow travelers with their own perspectives, desires, and needs."

In addition to offering trenchant insights into Issa's view of animals, Lanoue's book serves as a handy annotated anthology of very well translated animal-themed haiku by Issa. Lanoue readily admits that Issa did not formulate a systematic argument for animal rights, but he demonstrates how such an argument is implicit in the many hundreds of haiku that Issa devoted to observations of nonhuman species. The range of these haiku is wide. They sometimes offer tender imagery that makes us feel our kinship with other species:

resting his hands
on the green plum, asleep …
a frog

Others strive to envision nonhuman perspectives, one gateway to empathy for other creatures and their situation in this world:

do you think my head's
grass?
katydid

Or they depict relations between animals that mirror those of humans yet are rarely taken into account by humans because profit is typically privileged above ethical treatment:

the sold pony
looks back at mother…
autumn rain

Or joie de vivre, likewise brushed aside, as in this Charlotte's Web in miniature:

first snowfall —
soon to be boiled
the playful pig

Issa isn't blind to the awful fates animals sometimes encounter in nature, either:

big caterpillar —
into the ants' hell
it has fallen

Of course, he isn't always this dark. Other haiku show us comic encounters that break down the separation between civilization and nature and call our self-importance into question:

rainy season —
a crab strolls into
the big sitting room

gate after gate
making the rounds…
little butterfly

And comedy, like tragedy, may occur in a strictly natural setting as well:

> the wild cat
> looks astonished…
> a skylark

The contrast between humans and other animals is often not to the former's advantage:

> such sweet harmony
> to be reborn
> a meadow butterfly!
>
> lightning flash —
> only the puppy's face
> is innocent

That last must rank as one of Issa's slyest and most pointed haiku.

Lanoue cogently observes that Issa's portraits of animals are not typically "shallowly anthropomorphic" but instead reveal "a broader reality of animal existence that many people, indoctrinated to believe in human exceptionalism, fail to acknowledge." Issa's haiku possess an ethical dimension that transcends anthropocentrism and challenges untenable, self-serving assumptions.

Along the way, Lanoue offers a number of worthwhile insights about haiku in general as well as a few marvelous flourishes of naturalistic lore, such as: "With pentachromatic eyes containing five different color-sensitive cell types, butterflies perceive even more of the come-hither colors of flowers than we do, extending into the ultraviolet range beyond human eyesight." The world is full of marvels, our fellow travelers foremost among them.

When it comes to the other species with whom we share this planet, Issa, like Thoreau, Darwin, Henry Salt, Rachel Carson, Peter Singer, and many others after him, contributed to what James Joyce termed "the uncreated conscience" of the human race. As Lanoue puts it, "[Issa's] poems

narrow the perceived distance between human and nonhuman inhabitants of this planet, inspiring his readers to adopt, as he has done, a warmly compassionate appreciation of animals." For Issa, haiku was not a precious matter of art for art's sake but an ethical and mind-expanding form of literature deeply informed by his Buddhist perspective. We have much to learn from him yet and from Lanoue's excellent book, which should be read widely and remembered when awards are handed out. No haiku book I have encountered demonstrates so clearly the relevance of classical haiku to crucial concerns of our own time or delves so deeply into a theme of comparable significance.

I Wait for the Moon: 100 Haiku of Momoko Kuroda, translated with commentary by Abigail Friedman (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 2014). 144 pages; 5¼″×7¼″. Matte four-color card covers; perfect bound. ISBN 978-1-61172-016-7. Price: $14.95 from online booksellers

Reviewed by J. Zimmerman

I Wait for the Moon: 100 Haiku of Momoko Kuroda is the first book in English of selected haiku by Japanese poet Momoko Kuroda. Born in 1938, she began haiku practice in 1957 when she joined Yamaguchi Seison's haiku group. Although she set aside haiku in 1961, she began again in 1968 and has maintained a strong practice ever since. She is widely known in Japan where she has published six haiku collections, the first in 1981 and the sixth in 2013.

This book, beautifully presented with the full moon rising across the chapter title pages, contains translations of and comments on a hundred of Kuroda's haiku by her American student Abigail Friedman, author of *The Haiku Apprentice* (2006). Relatively few and isolated haiku by Kuroda have been translated into English elsewhere, particularly by Fay Aoyagi at http://fayaoyagi.wordpress.com/